

LONELY PLACES¹

By FRANCIS BUZZELL

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SHE was not quite forty years old, but so aged was she in appearance that another twenty-five years would not find her perceptibly older. And to the people of Almont she was still Abbie Snover, or "that Snover girl." Age in Almont is not reckoned in years, but by marriage, and by children, and grandchildren.

Nearly all the young men of Abbie's generation had gone to the City, returning only in after years, with the intention of staying a week or two weeks, and leaving at the end of a day, or two days. So Abbie never married.

It had never occurred to Abbie to leave Almont because all the young men had gone away. She had been born in the big house at the foot of Tillson Street; she had never lived anywhere else; she had never slept anywhere but in the black walnut bed in the South bedroom.

At the age of twenty-five, Abbie inherited the big house, and with it hired-man Chris. He was part of her inheritance. Her memory of him, like her memory of the big house, went back as far as her memory of herself.

Every Winter evening, between seven and eight o'clock, Abbie lighted the glass-handled lamp, placed it on the marble-topped table in the parlor window, and sat down beside it. The faint light of this lamp, gleaming through the snow-hung, shelving evergreens, was the only sign that the big house was there, and occupied. When the wind blew from the West she could occasion-

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ally hear a burst of laughter from the boys and girls sliding down Giddings's Hill; the song of some young farmer driving home. She thought of the Spring, when the snow would disappear, and the honeysuckle would flower, and the wrens would again occupy the old teapots hung in the vines of the dining-room porch.

The things that made the people of Almont interesting to each other and drew them together meant nothing to Abbie Snover. When she had become too old to be asked in marriage by any one, she had stopped going to dances and to sleigh-rides, and no one had asked her why. Then she had left the choir.

Except when she went to do her marketing, Abbie was never seen on the streets.

For fifteen years after Amos Snover died, Abbie and Old Chris lived alone in the big house. Every Saturday morning, as her mother had done before her, Abbie went to the grocery store, to the butcher shop, and to "Newberry's." She always walked along the East side of Main Street, Old Chris, with the market-basket, following about three feet behind her. And every Saturday night Old Chris went down-town to sit in the back of Pot Lippincott's store and visit with Owen Frazer, who drove in from the sixty acres he farmed as a "renter" at Mile Corners. Once every week Abbie made a batch of cookies, cutting the thin-rolled dough into the shape of leaves with an old tin cutter that had been her mother's. She stored the cookies in the shiny tin pail that stood on the shelf in the clothes-press of the downstairs bedroom, because that was where her mother had always kept them, to be handy and yet out of reach of the hired help. And when Jennie Sanders's children came to her door on their way home from school she gave them two cookies each, because her mother had always given her two.

Once every three months "the Jersey girls," dressed in black broadcloth, with black, fluted ruffles around their necks, and black-flowered bonnets covering their scanty

hair, turned the corner at Chase's Lane, walked three blocks to the foot of Tilson Street, and rang Abbie Snover's door-bell.

As Old Chris grew older and less able, Abbie was compelled to close off first one room and then another; but Old Chris still occupied the back chamber near the upstairs woodroom, and Abbie still slept in the South bedroom.

Early one October afternoon, Jim East, Almont's express agent and keeper of the general store, drove his hooded delivery cart up to the front steps of the big house. He trembled with excitement as he climbed down from the seat.

"Abbie Snover! Ab — bie!" he called. "I got somethin' for you! A package all the way from China! Just you come an' look!"

Jim East lifted the package out of the delivery cart, carried it up the steps, and set it down at Abbie's feet.

"Just you look, Abbie! That there crate's made of little fishin' poles, an' what's inside's all wrapped up in Chinee mats!"

Old Chris came around from the back of the house. Jim East grabbed his arm and pointed at the bamboo crate:

"Just you put your nose down, Chris, an' smell. Ain't that foreign?"

Abbie brought her scissors. Carefully she removed the red and yellow labels.

"There's American writin' on 'em, too," Jim East hastened to explain, "'cause otherwise how'd I know who it was for, hey?"

Abbie carried the labels into the parlor and looked for a safe place for them. She saw the picture-album and put them in it. Then she hurried back to the porch. Old Chris opened one end of the crate.

"It's a plant," Jim East whispered; "a Chinee plant."

"It's a dwarf orange-tree," Old Chris announced. "See, it says so on that there card."

Abbie carried the little orange-tree into the parlor. Who could have sent it to her? There was no one she knew, away off there in China!

"You be careful of that bamboo and the wrappings," she warned Old Chris. "I'll make something decorative-like out of them."

Abbie waited until Jim East drove away in his delivery cart. Then she sat down at the table in the parlor and opened the album. She found her name on one of the labels — ABBIE SNOVER, ALMONT, MICHIGAN, U. S. A. It seemed queer to her that her name had come all the way from China. On the card that said that the plant was a dwarf orange-tree she found the name — Thomas J. Thorington. Thomas? Tom? Tom Thorington! Why, the last she had heard of Tom had been fifteen years back. He had gone out West. She had received a picture of him in a uniform, with a gun on his shoulder. She dimly recollected that he had been a guard at some penitentiary. How long ago it seemed! He must have become a missionary or something, to be away off in China. And he had remembered her! She sat for a long time looking at the labels. She wondered if the queer Chinese letters spelled ABBIE SNOVER, ALMONT, MICHIGAN. She opened the album again and hunted until she found the picture of Tom Thorington in his guard's uniform. Then she placed the labels next to the picture, closed the album, and carefully fastened the adjustable clasp.

Under Abbie's constant attention, the little orange-tree thrived. A tiny green orange appeared. Day by day she watched it grow, looking forward to the time when it would become large and yellow. The days grew shorter and colder, but she did not mind; every week the orange grew larger. After the first snow, she moved the tree into the down-stairs bedroom. She placed it on a little stand in the South window. The inside blinds, which she had always kept as her mother liked them best

— the lower blinds closed, the top blinds opened a little to let in the morning light — she now threw wide open so that the tree would get all of the sun. And she kept a fire in the small sheet-iron stove, for fear that the old, drafty wood furnace might not send up a steady enough heat through the register. When the nights became severe, she crept down the narrow, winding stairs, and through the cold, bare halls, to put an extra chunk of hardwood into the stove. Every morning she swept and dusted the room; the ashes and wood dirt around the stove gave her something extra to do near the orange-tree. She removed the red and white coverlet from the bed, and put in its place the fancy patch-quilt with the green birds and the yellow flowers, to make the room look brighter.

“ Abbie Snover loves that orange-tree more’n anything in the world,” Old Chris cautioned the children when they came after cookies, “ an’ don’t you dare touch it, even with your little finger.”

The growing orange was as wonderful to the children as it was to Abbie. Instead of taking the cookies and hurrying home, they stood in front of the tree, their eyes round and big. And one day, when Abbie went to the clothes-press to get the cookie-pail, Bruce Sanders snipped the orange from the tree.

The children were unnaturally still when Abbie came out of the clothes-press. They did not rush forward to get the cookies. Abbie looked quickly at the tree; the pail of cookies dropped from her hands. She grabbed the two children nearest and shook them until their heads bumped together. Then she drove them all in front of her to the door and down the path to the gate, which she slammed shut behind them.

Once outside the gate the children ran, yelling: “ Ab-bie Sno-ver, na — aa — ah! Ab-bie Sno-ver, na — aa — ah!”

Abbie, her hands trembling, her eyes hot, went back into the house. That was what came of letting them

take fruit from the trees and vines in the yard; of giving them cookies every time they rang her door-bell. Well, there would be no more cookies, and Old Chris should be told never to let them come into the yard again.

That evening, when the metallic hiccough of the well pump on the kitchen porch told her that Old Chris was drawing up fresh water for the night, Abbie went out into the kitchen to make sure that he placed one end of the prop under the knob of the kitchen door and the other end against the leg of the kitchen table.

"It'll freeze afore mornin'," said Old Chris.

"Yes," Abbie answered.

But she did not get up in the night to put an extra chunk of wood in the stove of the down-stairs bedroom.

"Ab-bie Sno-ver, na — aa — ah! Ab-bie Sno-ver, na — aa — ah!"

Old Chris stopped shoveling snow to shake his fist at the yelling children.

"Your Mas'll fix you, if you don't stop that screechin'!"

And they answered: "Ab-bie Sno-ver, an' old Chris! Ab-bie Sno-ver, an' old Chris!"

Every day they yelled the two names as they passed the big house. They yelled them on their way to and from school, and on their way to Giddings's Hill to slide. The older boys took it up, and yelled it when they saw Abbie and Old Chris on Main Street Saturday mornings. And finally they rined it into a couplet,

"Ab-bie Sno-ver, an' Old Chris —
We saw Chris an' Ab-bie kiss!"

It was too much. Abbie went to Hugh Perry's mother.

Mrs. Perry defended her young son. "He couldn't have done it," she told Abbie. "He ain't that kind of a boy, and you can just tell that Old Chris I said so. I

guess it must be true, the way you're fussin' round!"

Mrs. Perry slammed the door in Abbie's face. Then she whipped her young son, and hated Abbie and Old Chris because they were responsible for it.

"That Abbie Snover came to my house," Mrs. Perry told Mrs. Rowles, "an' said my Hugh had been a-couplin' her name with Old Chris's in a nasty way. An' I told her —"

"The idea! the idea!" Mrs. Rowles interrupted.

"An' I told her it must be so, an' I guess it is," Mrs. Perry concluded.

Mrs. Rowles called upon Pastor Lucus's wife.

"Abbie Snover an' Old Chris was seen kissin'."

"It's scandalous," Mrs. Lucas told the pastor. "The town shouldn't put up with it a minute longer. That's what comes of Abbie Snover not coming to church since her Ma died."

On Saturday mornings when Abbie went down-town followed by Old Chris, the women eyed her coldly, and the faces of the men took on quizzical, humorous expressions. Abbie could not help but notice it; she was disturbed. The time for "the Jersey girls" to call came around. Every afternoon Abbie sat in the window and watched for them to turn the corner at Chase's Lane. She brought out the polished apples which she kept in the clothes-press all ready for some one, but "the Jersey girls" did not come.

"You haven't heard of anybody being sick at the Jersey house, have you, Chris?"

"Um? Nope!"

"Haven't seen Josie or Em Jersey anywhere lately?"

"Seen 'em at the post-office night afore last."

"H'mp!"

Abbie pushed the kettle to the front of the kitchen stove, poked up the fire, and put in fresh sticks of wood. When the water boiled she poured it into a blue-lacquered pail with yellow bands around the rim, carried it up the steep back stairs, and got out fresh stockings.

An hour later Old Chris saw her climbing up Tillson Street. He scratched his head and frowned.

Abbie turned the corner at Chase's Lane. The snow, driven by the wind, blinded her. She almost bumped into Viny Freeman.

"My, Viny! What you doing out on such a day?"

Viny Freeman passed her without answering.

"Seems she didn't see me," Abbie muttered. "What can she be doing away down here on such a day? Must be something special to bring her out of her lonely old house with her lame side. My! I almost bumped that hand she's always holding up her pain with. My!"

Abbie turned into the Jersey gate and climbed the icy steps, hanging onto the railing with both hands. She saw Em Jersey rise from her chair in the parlor and go into the back sitting-room. Abbie pulled the bell-knob and waited. No one answered. She pulled it again. No answer. She rapped on the door with her knuckles. Big Mary, the Jersey hired girl, opened the door part way,

"They ain't to home."

"Ain't to home?" exclaimed Abbie. "My land! Didn't I just see Em Jersey through the parlor window?"

"No'm, you never did. They ain't to home."

"Well, I never! And their Ma and mine was cousins! They ain't sick or nothing? Well!"

The snow melted; the streets ran with water and then froze. Old Chris no longer came into the parlor in the evening to sit, his hands clasped over his thin stomach, his bald head bent until his chin rested upon the starched neckband of his shirt.

They ate in silence the meals which Abbie prepared: Old Chris at one end of the long table, and Abbie at the other end.

In silence they went about their accustomed tasks.

Abbie, tired with a new weariness, sat in her chair

beside the marble-topped table. The village was talking about her; she knew it; she felt it all around her. Well, let them talk!

But one day Almont sent a committee to her. It was composed of one man and three women. Abbie saw them when they turned in at her gate — Pastor Lucas, Lorina Inman, Antha Ewell, and Aunt Alphie Newberry.

Abbie walked to the center of the parlor and stood there, her hands clenched, her face set. The door-bell rang; for a moment her body swayed. Then she went into the bay window and drew the blinds aside. Antha Ewell saw her and jerked Pastor Lucas's arm. Pastor Lucas turned and caught sight of Abbie; he thought that she had not heard the bell, so he tapped the door panel with his fingers and nodded his head at her invitingly, as if to say:

"See, we're waiting for you to let us in." Abbie's expression did not change. Pastor Lucas tapped at the door again, this time hesitantly, and still she looked at them with unseeing eyes. He tapped a third time, then turned and looked at the three women. Aunt Alphie Newberry tugged at his arm, and the committee of four turned about without looking at Abbie, and walked down the steps.

A few minutes later Abbie heard the door between the parlor and dining-room open. Old Chris came in. For a moment or two neither spoke. Old Chris fingered his cap.

"Abbie, I lived here forty-two years. I was here when you was born. I carried you around in my arms a little bit of thing an' made you laugh."

Abbie did not turn away from the window.

"I know what they came for," Old Chris continued. "Your Ma — your Ma, she'd never thought I'd have to go away from here."

Abbie could not answer him.

"I don't know who'll keep the furnace a-goin' when I'm gone, nor fill the up-stairs woodroom."

Still no answer.

"I'm old now — I'll go to Owen Frazer's farm — down to Mile Corners. He'll have some work I can do."

Old Chris stroked his baggy cheeks with trembling hands. Abbie still looked out of the window.

"I'm a-goin' down to the post-office now," said Old Chris, as he turned and went to the door. "Be there anything you want?"

Abbie shook her head; she could not find words. As Old Chris went down the hall she heard him mumble, "I don't know what she'll do when I'm gone."

That night Abbie sat in the parlor window longer than usual. It was a white night; wet snow had been falling heavily all day. Some time between eight and nine o'clock she arose from her chair and went into the long, narrow dining-room. The pat-pat of her slippered feet aroused Old Chris from his nodding over the *Farm Herald*. Finding that the hot air was not coming up strong through the register over which he sat, the old man slowly pushed his wool-socked feet into felt-lined overshoes and tramped down into the cellar, picking up the kitchen lamp as he went. Abbie followed as far as the kitchen. The pungent dry-wood smell that came up the stairs when Old Chris swung open the door of the wood cellar made her sniff. She heard the sounds as he loaded the wheelbarrow with the sticks of quartered hardwood; the noise of the wheel bumping over the loose boards as he pushed his load into the furnace-room. She went back into the parlor and stood over the register. Hollow sounds came up through the pipe as Old Chris leveled the ashes in the fire-box and threw in the fresh sticks.

When Old Chris came up from the cellar and went out onto the porch to draw up fresh water for the night, Abbie went back into the kitchen.

"It's snowin' hard out," said Old Chris.

"Yes," Abbie answered.

She led the way back into the dining-room. Old Chris placed the kitchen lamp on the stand under the fruit picture and waited. For a few moments they stood in the blast of hot air rising from the register. Then Abbie took up the larger of the two lamps. Through the bare, high-ceilinged rooms she went, opening and closing the heavy doors; on through the cold, empty hall, up the stairs, into the South bedroom. While she was closing the blinds she heard Old Chris stumble up the back stairs and into the chamber he had occupied ever since she could remember.

The night after Old Chris had gone, Abbie took the brass dinner-bell from the pantry shelf and set it on the chair beside her bed. Over the back of the chair she placed her heavy, rabbit-lined coat; it would be handy if any one disturbed her. Once or twice when she heard sounds, she put out her hand and touched the bell; but the sounds did not recur. The next night she tried sleeping in the down-stairs bedroom. The blue-and-gray carpet, the blue fixings on the bureau and commode, the blue bands around the wash-bowl and pitcher—all faded and old-looking—reminded her of her mother and father, and would not let her sleep. On the wall in front of her was a picture in a black frame of a rowboat filled with people. It was called "From Shore to Shore." Trying not to see it, her eyes were caught by a black-and-white print in a gilt frame, called "The First Steps." How she had loved the picture when she was a little girl; her mother had explained it to her many times—the bird teaching its little ones to fly; the big, shaggy dog encouraging its waddling puppies; the mother coaxing her baby to walk alone.

At midnight Abbie got out of bed, picked up the dinner-bell by the clapper, and went back up-stairs to the South bedroom.

The tall, bare walls of the big house, the high ceilings with their centerpieces of plaster fruits and flowers, the cold whiteness, closed her in. Having no one to talk

to, she talked to herself: "It's snowin' hard out — why! that was what Old Chris said the night before he went away." She began to be troubled by a queer, detached feeling; she knew that she had mislaid something, but just what she could not remember. Forebodings came to her, distressing, disquieting. There would never be any one for her to speak to — never! The big house grew terrible; the rooms echoed her steps. She would have given everything for a little house of two or three small, low-ceilinged rooms close to the sidewalk on a street where people passed up and down.

A night came when Abbie forgot that Old Chris had gone away. She had been sitting in her chair beside the marble-topped table, staring out into the night. All day the wind had blown; snow was piled high around the porch. Her thoughts had got back to her childhood. Somehow they had centered around the old grandfather who, years before, had sat in the same window. She saw him in his chair; heard his raspy old voice, "I married Jane sixty-eight an' a half years ago, an' a half year in a man's life is something, I'll bet you. An' I buried her thirty years ago, an' that's a long time, too. We never tore each other's shirts. Jane wanted to live a quiet life. She wanted one child, an' she was tenacious 'bout that. She never wanted any more, an' she had three, an' one of 'em was your Ma. She never wanted to be seen out with a baby in her arms, Jane didn't. I made her get bundled up once or twice, an' I hitched up the horse an' took her ridin' in my phaeton that cost two hundred dollars.— You'll be in your dotage some day, Abbie. I've been in my dotage for years now.— Oh, I altered my life to fit Jane's. I expected I had a wife to go out and see the neighbors with. By gosh! we never went across the street — I'll take on goodness some day, Abbie. By goll! that's all I'm good for to take on now.— Oh, it beat all what a boy I was. I and Mother broke our first team of oxen. When you get children, Abbie, let them raise themselves up. They'll do better

at it than a poor father or mother can. I had the finest horses and the best phaeton for miles around, but you never saw a girl a-ridin' by the side of me.— Some men can't work alone, Abbie. They got to have the women around or they quit. Don't you get that kind of a man, Abbie.— Oh, she was renowned was my old mare, Kit. You never got to the end of her. She lived to be more'n thirty year, an' she raised fourteen colts. She was a darned good little thing she was. I got her for a big black mare that weighed fourteen hundred pound, an' I made 'em give me ten dollars, too, an' I got her colt with her —”

Abbie suddenly realized that she was shivering; that her feet were cold; that it was long after nine o'clock. Old Chris must have fallen asleep in his chair. She went to the dining-room door and opened it; the dining-room was dark. Why? — why, of course! Old Chris had been gone for more than three weeks. She took hold of the door to steady herself; her hands shook. How could she have forgotten? Was she going crazy? Would the loneliness come to that?

Abbie went to bed. All night she lay awake, thinking. The thoughts came of themselves. What the town had to say didn't matter after all; the town had paid her no attention for years; it was paying her no attention now. Why, then, should she live without any one to speak to? “I'll go and get Old Chris, that's what I'll do. I won't live here alone any longer.” And with this decision she went to sleep.

In the morning when Abbie opened the kitchen door and stepped out onto the porch, frost lay thick upon the well pump.

She drew her shawl close around her and took hold of the pump-handle with her mittened hands. When she had filled the pail she went back into the kitchen. The sound of the wind made her shiver. To walk all the way to Mile Corners on such a day required green tea, so Abbie drank three cupfuls. Then, as on the day

when she went out to call upon "the Jersey girls," she carried hot water up-stairs and got out fresh stockings.

About nine o'clock three women of Pastor Lucas's church, standing on the front steps of Aunt Alphie Newberry's house, saw Abbie struggling through a drift.

"Why, there's Abbie Snover," said Jennie Chipman.

"She's turnin' down the road to Mile Corners," added Judie Wing.

Aunt Alphie Newberry opened the door to the three women:

"Whatever's the matter to be bringin' you callin' so early?"

"Ain't you heard yet?"

"We come to tell you."

"My! my! my! What can have happened?" Aunt Alphie exclaimed.

"Old Chris died last night—"

"Just after bein' middlin' sick for a day an'—"

"An' they say," Judie Wing interrupted, "that it was 'cause Abbie Snover turned him out."

Abbie reached the end of the town sidewalk. Lifting her skirts high, she waded through the deep snow to the rough-rutted track left by the farmers' sleighs. Every little while she had to step off the road into the deep snow to let a bob-sled loaded high with hay or straw pass on its way into town. Some of the farmers recognized her; they spoke to her with kindly voices, but she made no answer. Walking was hard; Owen Frazer's farm was over the hill; there was a steep climb ahead of her. And besides, Owen Frazer's house was no place for Old Chris. No one knew anything about Owen Frazer and that woman of his; they hadn't been born in Almont. How could she have let Old Chris go down there, anyway?

"Whoa up! Hey! Better climb in, Abbie, an' ride with me. This ain't no day for walkin'. Get up here on the seat. I'll come down an' help you."

Abbie looked up at Undertaker Hopkins. In the box of his funeral wagon was a black coffin with a sprinkling of snow on its top. Abbie shook her head, but did not speak.

"Guess I shouldn't have asked you," Undertaker Hopkins apologized. "Sorry! Get along as fast as you can, Abbie. It's gettin' mighty, all-fired cold. It'll be a little sheltered when you get over the hill."

Undertaker Hopkins drove on. Abbie tried to keep her feet in the fresh track made by the runners. She reached the top of the hill. Owen Frazer's red barn stood up above the snow. Undertaker Hopkins and his funeral wagon had disappeared.

"He must have turned down the Mill Road," Abbie muttered.

She reached the gate in front of the low, one-story farmhouse. A shepherd dog barked as she went up the path. She rapped at the front door. A woman appeared at the window and pointed to the side of the house. Abbie's face expressed surprise and resentment. She backed down the steps and made her way to the back door. The woman, Owen Frazer's wife, let her into the kitchen.

"Owen! Here be Abbie Snover!"

Owen Frazer came in from the front of the house.

"Good day! Didn't expect you here. Pretty cold out, ain't it? Have a chair."

Abbie did not realize how numb the cold had made her body until she tried to sit down.

"Maggie, give her a cup of that hot tea," Owen Frazer continued. "She's been almost froze, an' I guess she'll have a cup of tea. Hey! Miss Snover?"

"I want to talk to Old Chris."

"Talk to Old Chris! Talk to Old Chris, you want to?"

Owen Frazer looked at his wife. Abbie Snover didn't know, yet she had walked all the way to Mile Corners in the cold. He couldn't understand it.

"What'd you come for, anyhow, Abbie Snover?"

"Now, Owen, you wait!" Owen Frazer's wife turned to Abbie:

"Got lonesome, did you, all by yourself in that big barn of a house?"

"I want to talk to Old Chris," Abbie repeated.

"Was you so fond of him, then?"

Abbie made no answer. Owen Frazer went over to the sink and looked out of the window at the bed-tick smoldering on the rubbish heap. Owen Frazer's wife pushed open the door of the sitting-room, then stood back and turned to Abbie:

"You may be fine old family, Abbie Snover, but we're better. You turned Old Chris out, an' now you want to talk to him. All right, talk to him if you want to. He's in the parlor. Go on in now. Talk to him if you want to — go on in!"

The animosity in Mrs. Frazer's voice shook Abbie; she was disturbed; doubt came to her for the first time. As she went through the sitting-room, fear slowed her steps. Perhaps they had turned Old Chris away from her and she would have to go back alone, to live alone, for all the remaining years of her life, in that big house.